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ABSTRACT

Rural Australian high schools are at regional centers, and rural students often have to travel long distances or live in boarding houses or dormitories. A study examined rural Australian student experiences of the transition to high school. Data were gathered from interviews, questionnaires, and student journals of 10 rural students during the last 5 weeks of primary school and during the first three terms of Year 7 in high school. Findings indicate that students had many anxieties related to the physical environment and organizational culture of high school. The social culture of the high school was also a concern for rural students, particularly the possibility of not having friends and being vulnerable to older students. A third area of concern, personal reactions and adaptations, highlighted the many emotional challenges that students faced during the transition. Students felt scared and nervous about adapting to secondary school but also expressed excitement and anticipation of the forthcoming transition. High schools and their rural feeder schools should develop strategies to lessen the anxiety students experience upon entering high school. Recommendations include using the Internet for meeting future schoolmates and teachers, showing the layout of high schools, and coordinating orientation programs between primary and high school staff. (TD)

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The Lived Reality of the Transition to High School for Rural Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the processes involved in exploring the 'lived reality' of one group of Year 6 rural students as they made their transition to high school. A range of qualitative data collection techniques were used to track the experiences of the students during their last few weeks of primary school, and their transition to high school. Using the principles of Grounded Theory and specifically the processes of constant-comparative analysis, three categories emerged: *Adaptation to Organisational Culture*, *Adaptation to Social Culture* and *Personal Reactions and Adaptations*. While the transition to high school for the rural students was an eagerly anticipated event, the students also held many anxieties relating to the 'Organisational Culture' of high school. For example, some of the students reported that it was difficult to find their way around the high school. The 'Social Culture' of the high school was also a concern for the rural students, particularly due to the possibility of not having friends and being vulnerable to older students. These feelings continued during the students' initial weeks of high school but were later replaced by a focus upon academic requirements and the changing nature of social friendships. The third area of concern, 'Personal Reactions and Adaptations', related to how students responded differentially to their transition. Recommendations based upon these findings focus upon initiatives that may promote a smooth transition and can be accessed and implemented by both primary and secondary schools and students.

Introduction and Literature Review

The middle years of schooling are challenging times. During this stage of development children become early adolescents and are subject to numerous physical, psychological and social challenges. Early adolescents become increasingly aware of the outside world, find support and influence from their peers and test the boundaries that have been set. It is also during this period of development that students leave their familiar primary school setting and are placed into a generally unfamiliar high school setting. It is this transition from the primary to the high school setting which formed the basis for a ten-month qualitative study. However, while the students in this study had to grapple with the onset of adolescence they also had another issue to contend with - rurality.

There is much debate of how to define rurality. The Commonwealth School Commission (1988) defined 'rural' as a closely settled farming area not within 50 kilometres of a population over 50 000. Even though the majority of the Australian

population resides in coastal areas, over 95% of the Australian continent can be classified as 'rural' (Commonwealth School Commission, 1988).

However, there still remains the question of '*why* should educational research consider rural communities at all?'. Rural school communities possess distinctive characteristics in relation to community dynamics. Such schools tend to establish family-like environments with teachers having an in-depth knowledge of student strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, there tends to be a high degree of organisational flexibility and strong links between the school and community. It could be argued quite strongly however, that these qualities can also be found in many larger schools in more densely populated areas. The key difference between rural communities and more 'urbanised' areas is the degree of access the people of the community have to resources and services.

In 1999 the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care published the Access/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). The ARIA provides a 'score' out of 12 for each populated community in Australia with '0' indicating the most highly accessible areas and '12' indicating the most remote areas of Australia. The scores for populated communities were calculated based on the community's road distance from health, educational and other services such as religious and entertainment services. Remoteness, a common issue of influence to many Australian rural schools, then also tends to restrict a schools participation and involvement in activities outside the local area (Pietarinen, 1998; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988).

To what extent do such community dynamics influence the nature of students' transitions to high school given the fact that the school environment (in both primary and high school) is quite different to that of non-rural schools?

Although numerous studies have explored the transition to high school, these studies have predominantly been in urban or metropolitan areas (eg: Cotterell, 1979, 1992; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford & Blyth, 1987). Unfortunately few studies have considered the transitional experiences of rural students moving from small rural schools to much larger secondary schools that are located quite a distance from students' homes. Similarly, few studies have considered the impact the transition to high school has on students who are required to board or travel considerable distances to a regional centre high school. Furthermore, there have been a limited number of studies that have focused on transition for Australian students.

In the present study, it was deemed pertinent to focus on the lived experience of the transition for rural students in order to elicit participant voices. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth account of student's experiences. As Measor & Woods (1984, p.3) suggest:

> *... to arrive at an appreciation of childrens' most innermost thoughts and feelings and to gain a picture of their subjective experience, we must employ a range of ethnographic techniques over the whole period of transition.*

Two main questions were addressed. First, what expectations did these rural students have of high school and second, what was the lived reality of the transition to high school for these students?

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

For confidentiality purposes the school that participated in this study will be referred to as 'Ilkabah'. Ilkabah is situated approximately 50 km from the nearest regional centre. Ten students from Ilkabah Public School participated in the study. The school had a student population of approximately 100 students at the start of the research. The research methodologies chosen drew from, rather than strictly adhered to, the ethnographic case study approach, as time and money constraints prevented me from travelling the large distances between the high schools the students attended. I was however, able to spend five weeks on Practicum at Ilkabah Primary School. Data collection began in late 1999 during the student's final weeks of Year 6 and continued during the first three terms of Year 7 in 2000. Data collection consisted of face-to-face interviews and two open-ended questionnaires with students during their final weeks of Year 6 and interviews, questionnaires and journal keeping with students during the first three terms of Year 7. Parents and teachers of the students were given the choice of either a phone interview or an open-ended questionnaire during 2000. Allowing the parents and teachers to choose between the two methods proved to be a beneficial consideration, as I believe this 'choice' was the major contributing factor to the willingness of the parents and teachers to participate in the research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through the coding of collected data in order to generate categories. Data analysis was based within the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From this data analysis, three main categories were identified. While it is important to note that the categories represent a product of analysis in order to conveniently manage the data, it is the integration of the categories that explain the students' experiences. Discussion will now focus on each of these categories.

Results

The first category was labelled Adaptation to Organisational Culture. To summarise this category, the students were initially most apprehensive about school size and layout as well as the numerous teachers they would have at high school. While Orientation days tended to give the students some idea of the high school, the students still did not display confidence in their knowledge of the high school in terms of layout or teachers after this time. Alternatively, students tended to base their preparedness on the academic work and responsibilities that had been expected at Ilkabah. Once at high school however, these concerns regarding school layout and numerous teachers were quickly replaced by a focus upon inconsistencies between teachers in terms of style and management as well as a concern by students, parents and teachers for students' organisational skills.

While one or two Orientation days at high school may have reduced some of their anxieties and answered some of the students' questions about what to expect at high school, most suggestions to improve the transition, provided by students, parents and teachers, referred to strategies to bridge the gap between the social culture of primary and high school.

The second category was labelled *Adaptation to Social Culture*. Initially, the social culture of the high school was a daunting thought for students of Ilkabah. They faced the prospect of leaving their stable friendships and forming new social groups in a relatively unknown environment often without the support of established friendships. Older students in the new high school tended to make the students feel vulnerable to bullying, generally through the retelling of student myths and the lowly status of being a Year 7 student. However, older students who were already known to the Ilkabah students, tended also to give the students a sense of security in the strange and unfamiliar high school environment. Students endured the first days of high school without established friendships, but by the end of the first week, students were feeling more comfortable as they gradually formed friendships with other students.

One comment of interest from one of the participating students, Fiona, was that she had been put into a Year 7 class without any of her friends and as she stated, "for the first few weeks I was alone". This statement conveys some of the more harsh realities of the transition for students from smaller schools. Firstly, this student did not feel alone for a day or a few days. She felt alone for 'a couple of weeks'. Secondly, this student felt 'alone' and yet, she was surrounded by 600 other students. The highly personal feelings underpinning this idea are also a core concept of the third category – Personal Reactions and Adaptations.

The category Personal Reactions and Adaptations focused upon the personal feelings and emotions the students felt as they approached their entrance into the high school culture. From both the data gathered, and my own theoretical sensitivity regarding the experience, these feelings were a core facet of the transition and as such needed to be reflected in the final categories. It was apparent from the data collected and in accord with the aims of the research to present the students' experiences as in-depth accounts. Therefore, although feelings such as feeling 'lonely', 'scared' or 'nervous' were related to the social and organisational features of the schools, I felt that these feelings warranted a category that gave them rightful prominence in terms of the transition. Without acknowledging the multiple emotions the students' felt during this time was, I felt, ignoring the very 'human' aspect of this great change. So although, these emotions were inextricably related to the social and organisational culture of the schools, the separate category of '*Personal Reactions and Adaptations*' emerged to subsume this data.

The category of Personal Reactions and Adaptations highlighted the many emotional challenges that students faced, particularly across the more intense aspects of transition such as the last weeks of primary and the first weeks of secondary school. The students expressed feelings of being 'scared' and 'nervous' about adapting to organisational and social cultures. However, the students also expressed their excitement and anticipation of the forthcoming transition evident in one students comment as he stated he was looking forward to 'being new'. Also in this category was the issue of being 'tired' or 'sleepy'. This was identified as affecting both day and

boarding students and was not restricted to the beginning or end of the year. Reasons for student tiredness varied between the students. For example, one student who lived 50 kilometres from their high school had to get up at 5.30am in order to catch the bus to school at 7.00am. Two of the boarding students who were in separate high schools, also mentioned feeling sleepy. One student mentioned that she was kept awake by other students who were having pillow fights. The second student mentioned staying awake because she believed there might be a prowler outside her dormitory.

At the point of the actual transition, student's reactions were quite diverse. Some had coped with the changes extremely well, while some found the transition more challenging. The mention of 'homesickness' by boarding school students, parents and teachers alike tended to be focused on the beginning of the year although, some students did mention feeling 'homesick' through the year usually at the beginning of a new school term. However, by the end of Term Three of Year 7, all students, as noted by student, parent and teacher comments, tended to have settled into the culture of the high school.

Recommendations

So .... how can we apply these findings in a productive way to assist rural students, prepare and cope with the transition to high school?

As a result of this research, it is suggested that there is a need for greater coordination of preparatory strategies between high schools and their rural feeder schools (Johnstone, 2001) as bridging the gap between the primary and secondary school cultures is a challenge for *both* institutions (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). However, 'bridging the gap' does not have to wait for the development and implementation of government strategies and policy. There are strategies that through careful planning and programming can be implemented by primary and high schools.

The aim of preparatory strategies should be to lessen the anxiety the students' experience prior to and during their initial transition, rather than destroy their anticipation or 'desirable' feelings towards entering high school. As suggested by Simmons and her colleagues in their 1987 study of pubertal change and schooling, the optimal situation would be to achieve a 'balance of synthesis', that is;

> *- a balance between tension arousal and tension reduction, between over- and understimulation, between being challenged and being comfortable, between too many and too few demands, between growth and stability (Simmons, et al., 1987, p. 1232).*

In order to achieve this balance of synthesis, it is recommended that primary and high schools combine efforts to establish relevant programs tailored to address student concerns. This should occur prior to and during initial transition, particularly in the areas of the high schools' social and organisational cultures, as it is in these areas that students' anxieties are focused.

The following strategies have been devised from a consideration of the data collected in this research, literature reviews as well as student, parent and teacher comments. As such, some of the suggestions that I mention may already be in place in some schools, although this was not the case with the schools that participated in this study.

Simple activities using the Internet can be integrated into existing primary and high school curriculum structures to combat fears of getting lost. For example, secondary school students studying Design and Technology may assist the incoming rural students become familiar with the layout of the high school through the creation of 'virtual tours'. Not only would 'virtual tours' provide the opportunity for rural students to become familiar with the layout of the school and therefore lessen their anxieties, but this activity also provides an opportunity for the incoming students to view the actions of older students more as a support network who have taken an active interest in their entrance to high school and less like an informal controlling force of the high school.

The use of the Internet in the form of e-mail or 'chat' sessions prior to transition with students from other feeder schools may be one way to overcome the major disruptions to student social networks. In essence, the e-mail or chat sessions would provide opportunities for a 'pen-pal' situation in order to foster social friendships between schools. This initiative may reduce the 'undesirable' aspect of not having friends during the initial weeks of high school as prior contacts with other students may provide the students with a greater sense of security. Teachers and peer group leaders at the high schools may also be able to use e-mail or 'chat sessions' to welcome and generally 'get to know' upcoming Year 7 students. In effect, beginning a peer support or pastoral care style relationship *prior* to transition.

This suggestion raises issues of limited time and an increased workload for teachers. It would also be necessary therefore, to allow Year 6 and 7 teachers relief time during Terms 3 and 4 to allow for adequate time to prepare this style of computer-based Orientation program. Alternatively, using an Internet Service Provider to set up such a program, although still requiring some relief time to be scheduled for teachers, would reduce the amount of time a teacher would have to spend in developing the Orientation program. Either of these two suggestions would require financial assistance from the Department of Education and Training to assist in the payment for employing casual staff or to contribute to the costs of employing an Internet Service Provider.

In order to reduce the differences between primary and high school organisational cultures, other strategies a high school could employ include organising Year 7 lessons to be held in one classroom. This may reduce student anxiety regarding finding classrooms and reading timetables by having a minimum number of room changes for Year 7 students. The employment of Year 7 specialist teachers (a strategy already in place in some high schools) may reduce student anxiety related to adapting to numerous teachers and their expectations. *Alternatively,* the collaboration of Year 7 teachers may lead to the development of reasonable 'consistencies' or 'expectations' across Year 7 classes, such as 'across the board' formats for bookwork and general classroom management. Although it is not possible for all teacher's management and organisational styles to be identical, setting a level of consistency between teachers may assist students to familiarise themselves with general expectations of high school teachers and specific requirements for subject areas.

It is also suggested that high schools annually review the effectiveness of Orientation programs, through the use of student feedback, in order to identify strengths and

weaknesses of existing practice and address these issues accordingly. The sharing of strategies for Orientation days and activities between primary and secondary school staff could also be achieved through the use of a forum on the Internet, which may prove useful in compiling a list of valuable strategies to support Year 7 intake in terms of organisational and social cultures of various high school types.

Although these strategies aim to lessen anxiety of the transition to high school, Measor and Woods (1984, p.170) suggest that "it would be a mistake to aim for an entirely smooth, continuous transition" particularly in the terms of the social culture. They argue that schools:

> *... should not try to do too much, that there are some things pupils need to learn for themselves. What is needed, we suggest, is a supportive framework within which those lessons are learnt (Measor and Woods, 1984, p. 43).*

The recommendations mentioned previously would indeed act as supportive 'framework' for the students, not only within the social culture, but also within the organisational culture. These strategies may therefore, achieve the 'balance of synthesis' mentioned previously and still allow students to learn some lessons for themselves.

The current follow-up study of this research is examining the differences between Year 6 rural, regional centre and major city students as they make their transition to secondary school. This research may provide an indication of explicit differences between students from various rural and non-rural locations in terms of self-esteem and perceptions of their primary and high schools before and after their transition. The experiences of rural students will be further investigated through the use of case studies.

It is continued research into the unique circumstances of rural students that will ensure that primary and secondary schools develop strategies to prepare and assist rural students to cope with the transition to their various high schools. These strategies may also ensure that rural students' positive expectations of high school are maintained and better still, are confirmed. It is our duty as educators to build upon these high hopes and ensure that the students' positive expectations of their first year of high school continues throughout their final years of compulsory education.

If would like to know more about the research which forms the basis for this paper, the current research or, if you have any comments on the paper presented, I would gratefully appreciate your questions and/or feedback. I can be contacted by mail at School of Education, Locked Bag 588, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, by phone on 0419 228 367 (m) or by email: kajohnstone@csu.edu.au

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